

# Organic Growers Support Gypsy Moth Control Program

Gypsy moth is a terrible pest – if the current Meiners Oaks outbreak gets out of hand it can lead to defoliation and death of oaks and live oaks, conifers, manzanita, willow and possibly hundreds of other species. This would have incalculable consequences for the wildlife communities that depend on these trees, not to mention the visual impacts on the community.

This is documented information – the gypsy moth has been around for a couple of hundred years and its impacts are well understood.

Having the outbreak spread would also increase pressures on local agriculture – if the moth spreads, the quarantine area spreads. This would make it difficult for all commercial growers and impossible for organic growers to sell their fruit.

Just as gypsy moth impacts are well understood, so are the protocols for attempting to deal with gypsy moth infestations. A quarantine is imposed to prevent the movement of plant material infected with egg masses or larvae. Pheromone traps are deployed to check for spread of the infestation (once adult moths are detected for several years running, a breeding population is considered established. That's where we're at in Meiners Oaks.) When the existence of a breeding population has been confirmed, the first stage is application of a benign, biological insecticide, *Bacteria thuringiensis* (Bt.)



Organic Growers Steve Sprinkel, B.D. Dautch, Jim Churchill, Roger Essick

**Four local organic growers met with Ventura County Agriculture Commissioner Henry Gonzales on Friday, March 20, to affirm their support for the County's current eradication efforts using Bt: Robert "BD" Dautch of Earthtrine Farms, Steve Sprinkel of Gozo Farm and The Farmer and the Cook, Jim Churchill of Churchill Orchard and Roger Essick of Essick Farm Management all urge the community to join together in support of these efforts.**

Our reasons are as follows:

Bt is a benign material. It affects only Lepidoptera – not honeybees, not fish, not other wildlife, not humans, not cats, dogs or horses. It doesn't even affect Monarch butterflies (butterfly development is on a different schedule than gypsy moth, so the larvae aren't present when the Bt is applied.) Bt works by generating a protein crystal in the gut of the moth larvae, and only in the gut of moth larvae. It degrades in 3-4 days after application. It has been used for almost 100 years in farming, and has been an approved material in organic farming since the first protocols were established. Steve Sprinkel has used Bt since 1983 to control caterpillars on lettuce, tomatoes, and a broad number of crops in the cabbage family, including broccoli and bok choy; he is using it at Gozo Farm as this is being written.

The consequences of the gypsy moth infestation getting out of hand are incalculably awful. There's the defoliation and death of trees and the consequent shift in wildlife patterns; there's the consequences to commercial agriculture which contributes so much to the character of the Ojai Valley; there's the fact that the current, benign program would be followed by something much worse – the aerial spraying of organophosphate materials, which would be something we would all oppose.

In our lives there are plenty of reasons to distrust the government, and plenty of reasons to distrust multinational companies that push pesticides and chemical farming on us. But this outbreak of gypsy moth, and the current program to control the outbreak using a biological agent, aren't appropriate targets of distrust or opposition. The outbreak is real, its potential consequences are knowable, terrible, and avoidable, and the program to control the outbreak is exactly what opponents of indiscriminate use of industrial poisons in the environment should welcome: it's organic, it's avoiding the use of hard pesticides, and it's proactively controlling a plague which will if it spreads bring on the use of much worse chemicals.

We urge the community to support and cooperate with the County Agricultural Commissioner and his staff as he attempts to control the Gypsy Moth outbreak in Meiners Oaks using Bt.